D E B A T E

Postface: Concluding Remarks on Relevance and Impact of Political Science in Switzerland

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Abstract

We feel honored to contribute the postface to this debate which reflects on the relevance and impact of our discipline for the *Swiss Political Science Review*. In what follows, we have summarized the "take-home messages" that we identified when reading the debate. We have therefore synthesized those elements of the relevance and impact of political science that should hold true in a more generalizable or global context. In the second part, we put the insights from this debate in a Swiss context, whether academic, political, or societal. Most importantly, we elaborate on the peculiarities of the Swiss system and their implications for Swiss political science to be relevant and create an impact.

K E Y W O R D S

Direct democracy, Impact of science for society, Policy evaluation, Science-policy interface

Zusammenfassung

Wir fühlen uns geehrt, das Nachwort zu dieser Debatte zu verfassen, welches die Relevanz und den Einfluss unserer Disziplin für die Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft reflektiert. Im Folgenden haben wir die "take-home messages" zusammengefasst, die wir beim Lesen der Debatte identifiziert haben. Wir haben also jene Elemente der Relevanz und des Einflusses der Politikwissenschaft zusammengefasst, die auch in einem verallgemeinerbaren oder globalen Kontext gelten sollten. Im zweiten Teil stellen wir die Erkenntnisse aus dieser Debatte in einen schweizerischen Kontext, sei es akademisch, politisch oder gesellschaftlich.

Vor allem aber gehen wir auf die Besonderheiten des schweizerischen Systems ein und zeigen auf, was die Schweizer Politikwissenschaft tun muss, um relevant zu sein und Wirkung zu entfalten.

Résumé

Nous sommes honorées de contribuer à la postface de ce débat qui réfléchit à la pertinence et à l'impact de notre discipline pour la *Revue suisse de science politique*. Dans ce qui suit, nous avons résumé les "messages clé" que nous avons identifiés en lisant le débat. Nous avons synthétisé les éléments concernant la pertinence et l'impact de la science politique qui devraient être valables dans un contexte plus général ou global. Dans la deuxième partie, nous plaçons les idées issues de ce débat dans le contexte suisse, qu'il soit académique, politique ou sociétal. Plus important encore, nous développons les particularités du système suisse et leurs implications pour que la science politique suisse soit pertinente et crée un impact.

Riassunto

Ci sentiamo onorati di contribuire alla postfazione di questo dibattito che riflette sulla rilevanza e sull'impatto della nostra disciplina. In quanto segue, abbiamo riassunto i "take home messages" che abbiamo individuato leggendo il dibattito. Abbiamo quindi sintetizzato quegli elementi della rilevanza e dell'impatto della scienza politica che dovrebbero valere in un contesto più generalizzabile o globale. Nella seconda parte, inseriamo le intuizioni di questo dibattito in un contesto svizzero, sia esso accademico, politico o sociale. Soprattutto, elaboriamo le peculiarità del sistema svizzero e le loro implicazioni affinché la scienza politica svizzera sia rilevante e crei un impatto.

THE MAIN INSIGHTS GAINED THROUGH THIS DEBATE

Debating, discussing, and writing about the relevance and impact of political science are not easy tasks, as both relevance and impact can take many different forms and mean very different things to diverse audiences. These meanings can range from societal or practical innovations typically produced via research results to more or less institutionalized policy advice at different levels of government. To broaden the scope, the literature has started to enlarge the science-policy interface (SPI) to a science-policy-and-practice interface (SPPI) (Young et al., 2013; Cvitanovic & Hobday, 2018), to include a broad range of technical, societal, and finally policy solutions when talking about "impact and outreach" (Huber et al., 2023), and, finally, to situate the desired outputs and outcomes within the larger context of transition, transformation, and sustainability (Hering et al., 2016; Termeer et al., 2017).

In this context, the Debate presented here does an impressive job of showing the different facets of relevance and impact. In doing so, it maintains focus and precision, but still enables us to deduce at least three generalizable elements, which we briefly outline here:

- *Political scientists can be categorized into different actor types.* Bovens (this issue), following Burawoy ([2005](#)), distinguishes between political scientists who are active within the academic versus the non-academic arena and who have an instrumentalist versus a critical spirit. Brans and Timmermans (this issue) depart from a similar typology, on the one hand, with a focus on the type of evidence provided and on the other hand, on the frequency of advisory activity. All these authors reach similar conclusions. First, as with all ideal types, political scientists are most often of mixed types or change the actor types depending on the context, timing, or arena (see also the distinction [or not!] made by Bernardi (this issue) between curiosity and societally relevant research). Second, and even more interestingly, there seems to be a certain life cycle in policy advice. Put differently, the empirical survey study by Brans and Timmermans (this issue) shows that scientists who are more advanced in their careers, and who have thus acquired a certain cultural capital that makes them credible outside the scientific community, tend to engage more often in advocacy or advisory activities than younger scholars and typically also in a more "normative" or "value-based" way.

- *Important differences between arenas.* As Brans and Timmermans (this issue) show, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the different types of researchers from the arenas in which they are active. So-called pure scientists are found almost exclusively in academia, while more "outreach-oriented" political scientists are found either at the intersection of government and the societal arena or both together. Three points are important here. First, there are different locations for advisory activities (or the co-design of solutions) beyond the science–policy nexus. Therefore, in this postface, we adopt a "larger" view, referring to what we call the science-policy-and-practice interface. In a similar vein, Ochsner (this issue) refers to the science–society nexus. He reminds us that there are multiple pathways to the societal impact of research and that there is a need to better conceptualize this science–society nexus. Second, and this seems obvious to many political scientists, political scientists' engagement in the governmental arena, sometimes called the policy or political arena, seems to be the most difficult one. Why? For many of our colleagues, this is the arena in which they collect data. In some situations, it is thus difficult, if not impossible, to keep the empirical "database" intact while acting as a policy advisor (typically to some and not the entire database). Put differently, it is challenging to give advice on something that is usually the subject of research (see also Capano & Verzichelli, [2023](#); Garzia & Papadopoulos, this issue; and the discussion of Lepori, in this issue, that science can never be independent from politics). Or as Flinders (this issue) puts it: a certain distance to politics is needed, as "distance facilitates not only scientific perspective but also ensures a degree of democratic criticality". Third and finally, it is not only the role that political scientists play at the interface of science policy and practice that is important (Pielke, [2007](#)) but also who the addressees are in the respective arenas. Hofmann et al. ([2023](#)), for example, identified three types of evidence users contingent on their motivation: truth-seeking (i.e., making decisions on best available evidence), sense-making (i.e., taking into account evidence if in accordance with their beliefs), or benefit-maximizing (i.e., taking into account evidence if in accordance with their political strategies). This is a call for political scientists, or researchers in general, not only to reflect on their own role at the interface but also to get to know the addressees of evidence better, as both elements have a decisive influence on how much relevance and impact are ultimately achieved. We agree with Bernardi (this issue) that involving societal stakeholders in the research process can improve their understanding of and for that process. However, we also argue that the other way round is important as well and that researchers should gain

more knowledge about the political, societal, or economic processes if they want to have an impact on or in them.

- *Diversity in political systems and landscapes.* Flinders (this issue) and Ochsner (this issue) discuss the differences in funding schemes across countries, and the degree to which funding can finally have an influence on the production of relevant and impactful results. What is interesting in both articles is the more-or-less explicit mention of the underlying culture of dealing with science, on the one hand, and politics, on the other hand (see also Garzia & Papadopoulos, this issue). It is true that the United Kingdom (UK), Switzerland, and many other countries have very different logics, institutions, and cultures when it comes to dealing with policy advice. Perhaps provocatively, a country can provide the "best" funding system that guarantees both curiosity-driven and societally relevant research, but if the "receiver side" does not want or need the knowledge provided by the researchers, the impact will be very limited.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN RELEVANCE AND IMPACT ON THE SWISS LANDSCAPE

Even though Switzerland is often praised as a paradigmatic case (Rokkan, 1974) or a special case of a political system (Church & Head, 2015), we do not expect that Swiss political scientists confront contexts and challenges that are very different from elsewhere when they want to be relevant or have an impact. But still, in this postface, we reflect on what we have learned in this debate and summarize in a non-systematic but illustrative way what makes Switzerland very similar to, or else different from, other countries when it comes to acting at the science-policy-and-practice interface (see also Hadorn et al., 2022). We have identified the following four features of the Swiss landscape and their consequences for political science as a discipline at the interface:

- *Little push and little pull.* Switzerland is rather "weak" on both sides, that is, regarding the scientific push to generate results of high societal and concrete impact and the pull from society and mainly from political decision-makers to get evidence to inform their decisions (Hering, 2018; Sarewitz & Pielke, 2007). In the academic arena, there are not many incentives (other than some specific funding schemes, which we consider below) for scientists to engage in impactful research. We agree with Bovens (this issue) that "academic achievement [and thus publications and acquired third-party funding in contrast to outreach products and real-world innovations] remains by far the most important indicator in research assessments and tenure decisions at universities" and conclude that incentives for impact from academia in general, and universities in particular, are still largely missing (which might be a good or bad thing; we do not judge at this point). This also explains why more advanced (in contrast to younger) academic individuals engage in policy advice and, if they do so, in a rather value-oriented and normative way (Brans & Timmermans, this issue). However, what is particular in Switzerland is the low pull from political decision-makers. Not only do we lack an institutionalized policy advisory system like the UK or the United States (US), for example, but the national parliament and many other offices follow the so-called militia system with non-professional elected officials. In brief, this means no or limited time and staff support to make decisions. Elected officials in Switzerland are thus even more dependent on timely and digestible evidence than their international colleagues, both of which are rare ingredients of scientific advice. To conclude this point on a positive note, we agree with Ochsner (this issue) that for some years now, one have been able to observe the rather negative effects of the UK-inspired impact agenda on Swiss funding in political or social sciences. However, as

he suggests, research in Switzerland also benefits from being relatively unconstrained by such an agenda. Moreover, if a political scientist is truly interested in providing policy advice, be it as an "opinionist" or an "expert" (Brans & Timmermans, this issue), there is a wide range of extra-parliamentary committees, specialized expert groups, and ad-hoc task forces in Switzerland in which one can engage (Hirschi et al., 2022), some with more, others with less, impact.

- *Direct democracy and citizens' need for (scientific) information*. One of Switzerland's most famous institutional peculiarities is its strong reliance on direct democratic instruments (Stadelmann-Steffen & Leemann, 2023). While most of the decisions are still made by representatives of the people, and less than 8% of legislation are contested in referendum votes (Vatter, 2020), the Swiss political system, more strongly than others, calls for "information to the people" and not only "information to selected decision-makers or stakeholders." Most notably, during political campaigns leading up to ballot decisions, citizens may want to search for information regarding the issues at stake to form their opinions. As documented by an extensive literature, they thereby often use cognitive shortcuts such as party cues (Kriesi, 2005, 2012; Walder & Strijbis, 2023) but it has also been shown that an important group of voters uses and searches for different sources of policy- or argument-based information, which includes scientific evidence (Colombo & Kriesi, 2017; Dermont & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2020; Zumofen et al., 2023). Hence, institutionally, a direct democratic setting provides favorable conditions for scientific information and science communication to directly reach and target citizens. This may be seen as a way, as Bernardi (this issue) suggests, to involve the public in the research process. However, a more pessimistic view suggests that direct democracy can hinder the impact of scientific evidence and information on political outcomes. This is particularly evident in the contexts of polarized and heated campaigns during which citizens may be unwilling to consider scientific evidence and instead engage in biased and selective information processing (Zumofen et al., 2023). However, even from this perspective, scientific output remains relevant to public opinion formation, although successful science communication also depends on an additional condition: Certainly, the addressees of scientific evidence and the motivations of "evidence users" (Hofmann et al., 2023) are crucial, but so is timing. To facilitate relevance and impact, science communication to the population must come at the right moment; that is, it must occur on a recurring basis and outside of conflictual campaigns.

- *True policy evaluation culture*. In our view, a "best practice" example of the inclusion of (academic or expert) knowledge is policy evaluation. Switzerland is the first country to have policy evaluation enshrined in its constitution, which in a way institutionalizes the "pull side" from politics and public administration and thus creates a special space for critical expertise on policy programs. Furthermore, Switzerland has two official evaluation bodies, the Parliamentary Control of the Administration and the Swiss Federal Audit Office, as well as several policy evaluation divisions in different federal and even cantonal administrative agencies and parliamentary services. Why mention this here? Compared to other countries, the Swiss evaluation culture is perhaps not the oldest, but it is very much science-driven (Sager et al., 2017): political actors, and mainly the Swiss parliament, hold responsibilities for the evaluation mandate, but (scientific and other) experts then independently conduct the evaluation study and draft the evaluation report. Furthermore, public but also private evaluation bodies follow the so-called SEVAL standards, that is, the standards developed by the Swiss Evaluation Society. This society emerged from a program funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and is today a platform of evaluation expertise between academia, administration, and practice. Finally, evaluation scholars can gain or accumulate their expertise from evaluation studies at the certificate, diploma, or even masters' levels at Swiss universities. Stolyarenko (2014) concluded that there is a strongly developed supply side and thus expertise in policy evaluation in Switzerland, but that the demand side could

still be improved. Policy evaluation is therefore a good example of a well-developed scientific push side, but the pull side could still increase its readiness and sensitivity.

• *Practice-related research funding opportunities.* In Switzerland, research funding has become increasingly dependent on social impact, although not to the same extent as in the UK (Flinders, this issue). As outlined by Ochsner (this issue), practice- and innovation-oriented research is primarily funded by InnoSuisse, but the Swiss National Science Foundation also has more and more funding instruments that (partially) promote impact. It is important to mention, with respect to relevance and impact, the role of "Ressortforschung" that is promoted and funded by the Swiss Confederation and different administrative units at diverse decisional levels. They support impact-oriented projects that focus on specific "priority topics," such as the energy transition, chemical safety, and climate services. In our view, these initiatives guarantee two things. On the one hand, research results are better synchronized with the policy cycle and more closely elaborated in cooperation with key addressees, such as public servants or industry representatives. On the other hand, these funding initiatives address Bernardi's (this issue) critique that individual project-based impact evaluation is too short-sighted: Larger and long-term programs are more likely to have a broad impact that is not solely visible or measurable through individual research results, but rather in a long-term, sustainable, and coherent manner.

CONCLUSIONS FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE IN SWITZERLAND

Overall, we conclude that Switzerland is not that different from other countries with respect to relevance- and impact-related challenges and opportunities. The relevance and impact of political science in Switzerland is not always desired, it can certainly be improved, and sometimes, but not always, it leads to more excellent research or technically "better decisions." Political science can and should encourage further reflection on its own role within the science-policy-and-practice interface. In this process, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences in general, and the Swiss Political Science Association in particular, could and should play a crucial role. Both are important bodies to guarantee identity building and community development on the one side and provide channels and platforms for outreach activities with policy and practice on the other. In that respect, the Swiss Political Science Association, besides more traditional activities such as annual conferences and the publication of the *Swiss Political Science Review*, has promoted, introduced in 2015 the online platform *DeFacto* (www.defacto.expert), where political and other social scientists can communicate their research findings to a broader audience.

However, as we have also learned in this debate, acting at the science-policy-and-practice interface is not only institutionally driven; it is very often and crucially dependent on an individual decision taken by researchers about the exact type of "policy advisor" (if any) they want to be.

In this postface, we also outlined four features of the Swiss landscape when it comes to designing the science-policy-and-practice interface. The rather modest "policy advice" culture from both the push and the pull side, as well as the direct democratic context, show that there is still room to improve science communication and to better identify diverse audiences and their needs (ranging from elite actors and stakeholders to citizens and media). Initiatives like *DeFacto* seem key not only to promoting impact in research, but also to communicating about it.

We then presented policy evaluation in Switzerland as a best-practice example of a well-organized scientific supply side. However, this example also shows the importance of trans-disciplinarity, the co-design of solutions between science, policy, and practice, and the interconnectedness of

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academia with the public administration and the private sector (Sager, 2007; Hoffmann et al., 2017; Flinders, this issue). Similarly, funding that focuses on impact, as typically promoted by federal authorities and administrative agencies, not only requires links to practitioners, but also inter-disciplinary collaboration. Impact, especially in relation to grand challenges and severe problems, obviously cannot be produced by political scientists alone, but needs to be produced in inter- and trans-disciplinary settings. This means that engineers, health and natural scientists, and the social sciences and humanities, for example, must work together to maximize scientific relevance and impact. Certainly, this involves questions about the right number of scientists and disciplines, the transparency of selection criteria for experts and stakeholders, or the risks of oversimplification that need to be critically asked and answered. But, above all, it is an appeal to our discipline to become more involved. Hence, the question is not only about the relevance and impact of our dis-cipline, but also about its willingness to engage more in inter-disciplinary consortia and to learn more about trans-disciplinary methods.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable since no new data were generated or analysed for this study.

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